

MARTIAN MOVIES

Jonathan Cook looks at ways of giving your Science Fiction movies that 'special' look

From *Star Wars* to *Alien*, the cinema in recent years seems to be preoccupied with looking to the future, whether it be escapist fantasy or horror. Every year a handful of amateurs tackle this most difficult of genres with varying degrees of success, the notable leader in this field being of course Roy Spence. Making a science fiction film poses a number of technical problems and unlike the professional the amateur has to find the answers for himself.

No doubt to many the prospects of working with model spaceships and alien landscapes is a daunting and somewhat off-putting one; but it needn't be, and nor should it necessarily involve hours of model making or anything more than a shoestring budget.

HOLIDAY

The emphasis as with all SF must be credibility. You have to be able to believe in what you are seeing. So for the amateur the use of models and sets should be kept to the bare minimum, because without the aid of lavish optical effects and an army of technicians, even the most gifted of model makers will still end up with models that look like — models.

Concentrate therefore on modifying real locations instead, such as unusual places you might visit whilst on holiday. The idea of combining an SF film with a holiday is not as far-fetched as it may sound.

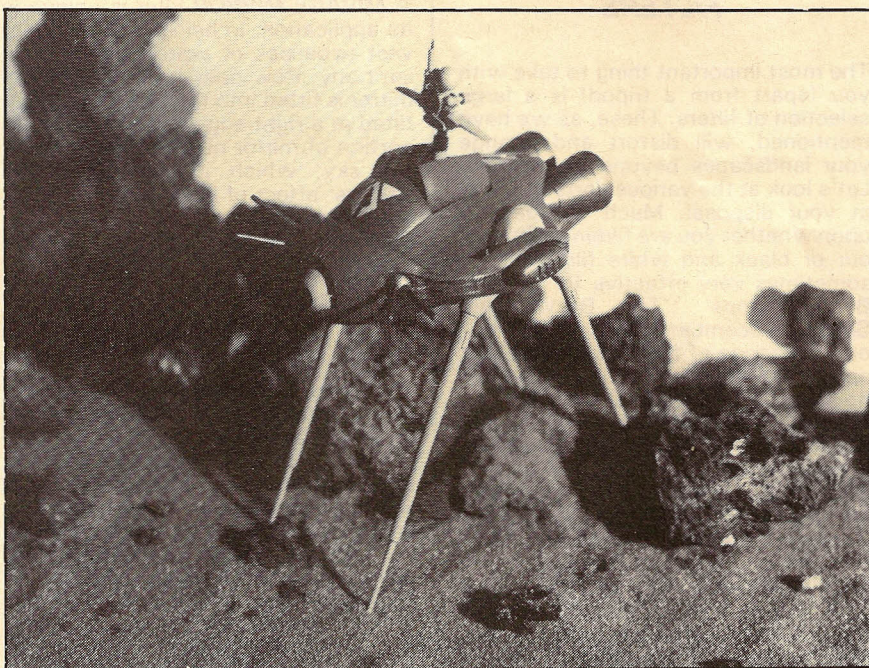
Firstly, a real location like a mountain range or sandy beach is much easier to film than it is to build, and secondly, with the use of filters it will look a lot more convincing if filmed for real. If lucky enough to be able to film abroad, you can also take advantage of cloudless skies, strong ultraviolet light and unusual vegetation/rockforms. The sky's colour is important as we will come to see when using filters. The harsher ultra violet will also produce the feel of an alien environment, with its changed atmospheric conditions. Rockforms and vegetation will have the same effect if they are suitably exotic, and so it is worthwhile to exploit all these elements to the full.

A DIVORCE

The holiday is normally a family occasion and this is why such a project is ideally suited to the holiday trip. For those who want to, it is quite feasible to film your alien landscapes at the same time as you make your holiday film or documentary. You can therefore come home with a film, a suntan and not a divorce! There's also no



This sort of scene looks far more convincing than a model set. Sensible use of filters can make the most ordinary landscape look alien



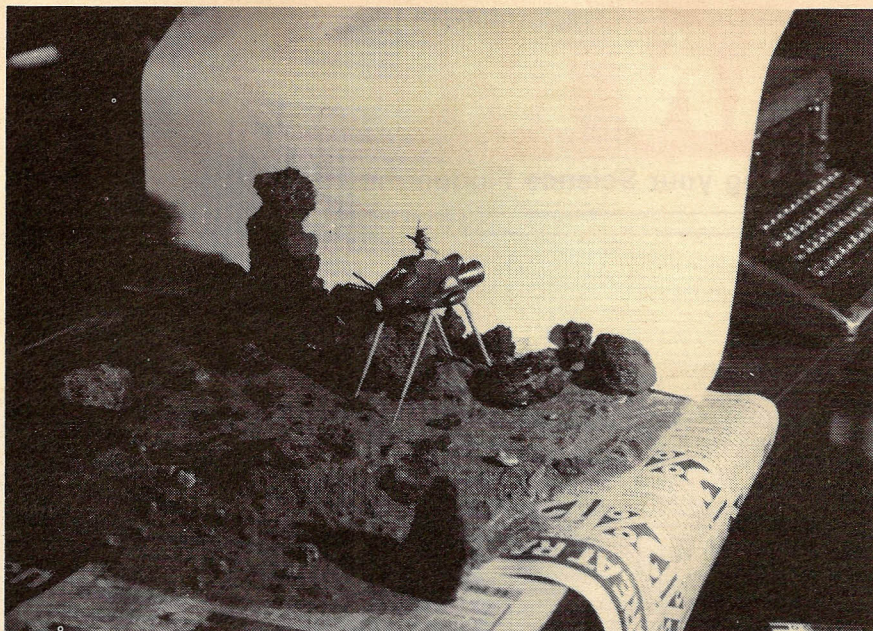
This model cost less to build than the price of a cartridge of sound cine film

need to cart huge models (or spacecrafts) with you or leave your kids at home just because they haven't got pointed ears. . .

RESEARCH

Before you go on holiday, remember that research into the places you hope to go to will reap great dividends. A trip to the local library will be well worth the effort, because it will enable you to see what the area you are

visiting looks like, so you can plan things properly in advance and be able to pencil out a few ideas beforehand. Places of geological (but not necessarily tourist) interest might also be brought to your attention and while on the subject of forward planning it is also advisable to invest in a number of picture postcards (particularly the larger format ones sometimes on



The rock in this 'landscape' came from Lanzarote, and the 'sand' is coloured sawdust as available from model shops

sale), so that on your return you can still film off these if necessary.

FILTERS

The most important thing to take with you (apart from a tripod) is a large selection of filters. These, as we have mentioned, will distort and change your landscapes beyond recognition. Let's look at the various sorts of filters at your disposal. Much will depend upon whether you are filming with colour or black and white filmstock — sometimes very effective for SF (see Beryl Shapps' "The B+W Cine Show": December '84 issue). For colour, the range of filters is greater, but any of the filters mentioned below will do for black and white as well, but the effect is generally lessened as the major impact of B&W is the loss of colour anyway:-

COLOURED POLARIZERS: A polarizing filter is normally used to control glare and unwanted reflections, but they are also supplied in different colours, and when used in conjunction with a neutral polarizer you can control the colour tones by rotating the filter within the filter holder.

SEPIA or SUNSET filters will also produce overall red/orange/brown shades, which are particularly effective on rocky landscapes, especially if you wish to create man-like terrains.

PRISM filters are a useful device for producing ethereal effects, as they can completely rearrange and distort the colours and patterns of any shot.

GRADUATED FILTERS are perhaps the simplest of all optical devices for creating bizarre skies, and work best when the sky is clear, because the overall tone variation will be less striking, and it is easier to make a model

skyline using just a plain piece of card than trying to draw clouds on it. (Though the matching of the two is by no means essential.)

A MIRAGE MIRROR filter is unique in its application, in being able to create vast expanses of water where there isn't any. How does it do it? Well the mirror is fitted into the filter holder and tilted at a right angle to the lens. That portion of mirror now in view reflects the sky, which if blue gives the 'mirage' effect of being able to see an oasis of water.

This filter, like the rest, are available from Cokin.

SETS

Once the cutaways establishing the scene have been shot, the next step is to decide upon what sort of set you are going to build. View your footage with a critical eye, and decide upon which shots have worked best. The backgrounds must again look convincing, and this is why it is a good idea to collect pieces of rock, gravel, or vegetation from the scenes you have filmed. The photograph shows pieces of volcanic rock taken from the lava fields of Lanzarote (the famous scenes from *One Million Years BC* with Raquel Welch and the Pterodactyl were filmed there). The sandy areas seen in-between are made of coloured sawdust available from most model shops. With filters though, there is no reason why you couldn't make your own using ordinary sawdust, or polystyrene chippings. The design of your set is only limited by the sort of material you have already filmed and the limits of your imagination and patience. To assist you, model shops will also supply you with assorted imitation vegetation and pieces of natural cork bark to make into rocks and boulders.

MODELS

The cost of building sets is usually very small, and so also are the models if you cut a few corners. To build the model shown costs less than a sound cartridge of cine film. This was constructed from a commercially available kit. You can of course make your own from all sorts of household items, but apart from it being more complicated, (and if you use items such as balsa wood more expensive), it is also probably easier to spot as not being real.

Making models from plastic kits is more straightforward, and the small delicately moulded pieces look more convincing when seen as a whole. This is not to say your model has to look like a commercially designed product as seen in the photograph. It could be made from any number of kits such as tanks, cars, planes or bikes for instance. The component parts can be mixed up and then cemented together in any shape you like to form alien installations or spacecrafts. From two kits you may have enough spare parts to build more than one model.

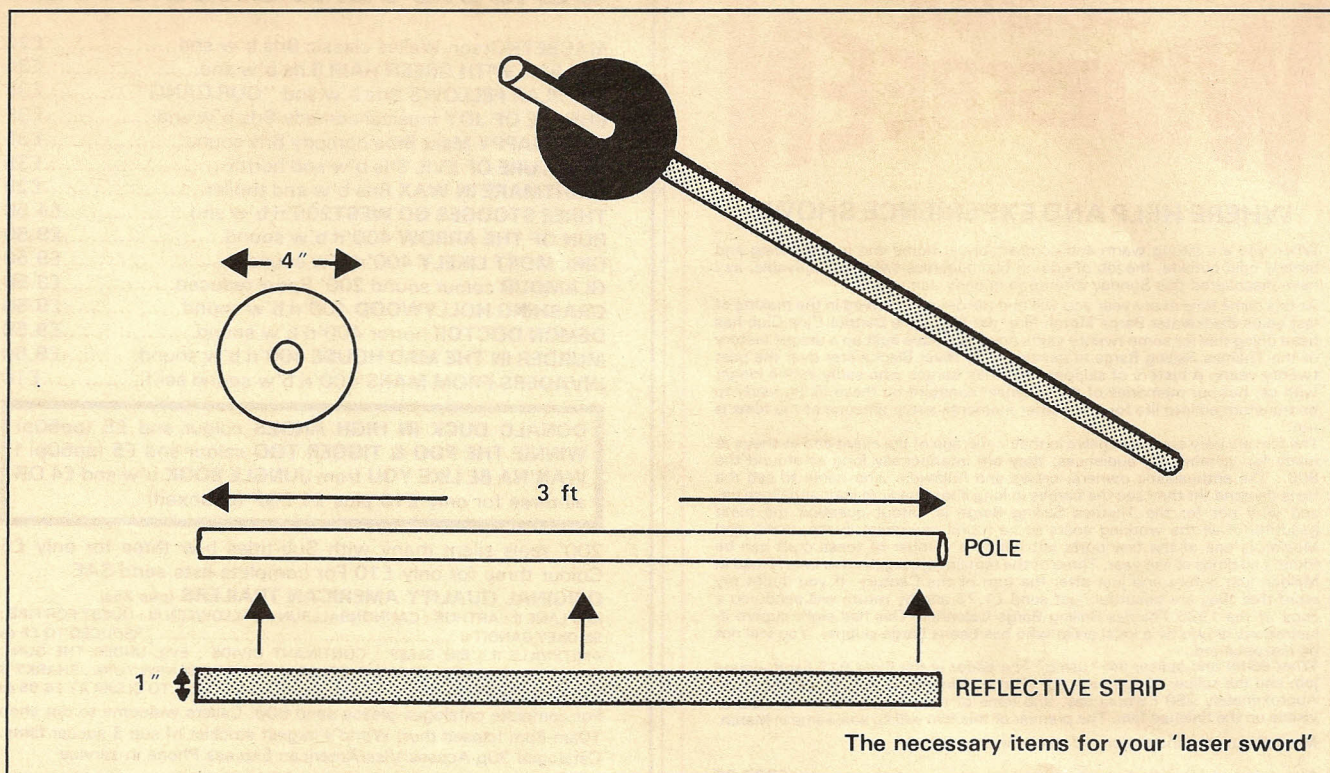
STAR WARS

So far we have only covered the more simple effects and haven't touched upon matte effects involving movements of models in space, or make up for creating alien beings. You may wish to take it further and build such things as entire interior sets with mock ups of control rooms onboard spacecraft to create *Star Wars* adventures on super 8, but be warned, the more effects you include, the more chances you have of failing to make them CREDIBLE. The effects we have looked at so far can be created by anyone who owns a camera with a focusing lens and a tripod. But are there any other simple effects that do not require you to be George Lucas?

LASER WEAPONS

Most science fiction films at the cinema these days depend heavily upon special effects, particularly with laser weapons. To really amaze your audience, have a go at building a laser sword. The laser sword was first seen at the cinema in the *Star Wars* epics. It comprised a solid field of energy that could be wielded like a sword, except it could be switched on and off. To make your simulated laser sword you will need a broom handle and some silver foil.

The broom handle will need to be cut to a length of approximately three feet. Now take a piece of thick cardboard; cut a circle out of it of about 4 inches in diameter and make a hole in its centre of the same diametric size as the pole. The disc should then be pushed along the handle of a distance of about a hand's length. Make sure there is sufficient room for the user to be able to get a good grip of what has become the sword's handle. Secure



using glue or sticky tape. Paint the handle and its shield a dark grey. You can add your own embellishments, such as switches, at a later date.

The remainder of the pole should then be painted a matt black. Take the silver foil and cut it to the length of pole, and as wide as half the pole's diameter.

Alternatively you could use 3M silver reflective tape. The idea is that the matt black area of the sword is shown to the camera when it is in the 'off' position, and when it is switched 'on' you quickly rotate the reflective side towards the camera and the light, to produce a shimmering glow along the length of the pole. This appears to

stab outwards if you make sure the light catches the base of the sword first. Trial and error will soon show you the best angles; it is advisable to have a dark background with perhaps a diffuser filter to produce a shimmering glow. Used with an electrical hum on the soundtrack this can be very effective.

